

ask emma



**SHERYL BERK
& CARRIE BERK**



"Emma! You're going to be late for school!"

The sound of her mom's bellowing woke Emma Woods out of the most perfect, most amazing dream she'd ever had. In it, Zac Efron was professing his undying love—and posting a selfie with her—on his Instagram feed. It read *#relationshipgoals* and had over a million likes.

"Emma Elizabeth, do you hear me?" her mom called again. "Breakfast is on the table—and it's getting cold."

Emma pulled the covers over her head and willed herself back to sleep. Maybe Zac hadn't drifted too far away. . . .

"Emmmaaaaa," her mother called again. "It's seven thirty. The bus will be here in fifteen minutes!"

Emma groaned and crawled out of bed. She knew her mom would never give up. She tossed on a sweatshirt and jeans, brushed her teeth, and swept her blond hair into a messy bun. It was the best she could do given the time limit.

When she finally arrived downstairs at the breakfast table in their kitchen, her older brother, Lucas, had gobbled up most of the pancakes and left her an empty container of OJ.

"You snooze, you lose," he said, snickering while licking the sticky maple syrup off his fingers. "Dad and I helped ourselves to seconds."

"Thirds." Their father looked up briefly from his

newspaper. "Your brother is a growing boy."

"I'm a high school freshman," Luc agreed. "Ninth graders need brain food."

"You need a brain," Emma muttered under her breath. She reached for the only banana left in the fruit basket. "Did you eat the whole bunch? There were six of them yesterday."

Luc tapped his forehead. "Like I said, brain food."

Her mom handed her a granola bar. "This is from my hidden stash," she said, winking. "Luc has no idea where I keep them."

"In the cabinet with the dog's food," he whispered to his sister when their mom's back was turned. Then he sneaked a piece of bacon under the table to Jagger, the family Labradoodle. "There's no pullin' one over on us, is there, boy?"

"You know what your problem is?" Emma huffed.

"You think you know *everything*—but you don't."

"I know *your* problem," Luc shot back. "You like to stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Do not!" Emma argued.

"Really? What about Harriet's extreme makeover?"

Emma bit her lip. Her BFF had clearly needed a new look for the start of seventh grade this year—it just hadn't gone as well as she'd hoped. "The highlights will fade out . . . eventually," she said.

"What did you do to Harriet?" her father asked, suddenly interested in the conversation.

"She made Harriet look like a skunk with a big white stripe down her head," Luc said, cracking up.

"It was supposed to look like sun-kissed highlights," Emma said, defending her efforts. "I just think we left the dye on too long."

"Ya think?" Luc chuckled again. "Is she still wearing a baseball cap to school every day?"

"I dunno." Emma wrinkled her nose. "Maybe."

"Like I said, you need to mind your own beeswax."

But it was nearly impossible for Emma *not* to step in when a situation needed fixing. Harriet had always hated her mousy brown hair—anything, Emma reasoned, would be an improvement. It wasn't

Emma's fault that her phone battery had died and the timer never went off . . . or was it?

"Five more minutes and she would have been bald," Luc said with a smirk. "Seriously. Emma fried her friend's hair."

"That's enough, Lucas," her mom refereed. "I spoke to Harriet's mom, and they're going to take her to the salon to fix it next week. They just want to let her learn her lesson for a few days."

"But what about her?" Luc said, sticking his pointer finger in his sister's face. "Why doesn't she get grounded? When is she gonna learn her lesson?"

"That is a good question," her mom said. "Em, not everything needs fixing. Harriet was just fine the way she was."

Emma shook her head emphatically. "Uh-uh, she was insecure and miserable. She hated her hair. I was trying to make her feel better about herself."

"I know you were, honey," her mom said. "But sometimes people need to figure things out for themselves."

"Not if I can help it," Emma insisted. "Do you think Dad just sits back and lets people figure things out for themselves?"

Her father raised an eyebrow. "Emma, I'm a cardiologist. It's my job to figure out what's wrong."

"He has a medical degree," Luc piped up. "It's that big plaque on the wall in his office. What's on your wall besides a Justin Bieber poster?"

Emma rolled her eyes. "I'm just saying that if someone asks for my help or advice, I should give it."

"Maybe they should send out an email blast to everyone at Austen Middle School," Luc said. *"Warning! Never ask Emma anything."*

Emma suddenly felt a spark of inspiration. In her case, it was never a lightbulb going off over her head. It was more of a tingling in her fingertips, her own spark of creativity telling her she was onto something.

"Thanks for the great idea, Luc," she said, slapping her brother on the back. "I'll take it under serious consideration."

Emma grabbed her banana and granola bar and headed for the front door. This was one morning she just couldn't be late.